



Left to right: Mast of the Salem Express; Between the twin funnels, Salem Express; A pair of bottles from the wreck of the Toa Maru, Gizo, Solomon Islands; Moving towards the bow of the Salem Express



SHIPS OF LOST SOULS

: H E SAWYER

> IT'S A BEAUTIFUL MORNING. OUR LIVEABOARD GLOWS BRILLIANT WHITE AGAINST THE DREAMY BLUE, AND THE SUN SCATTERS A MILLION DIAMONDS ON THE SURFACE OF THE RED SEA. CONDITIONS COULDN'T BE BETTER FOR THE FINAL DIVE OF THE WEEK, AND YET SOME OF OUR PARTY ARE SITTING THIS ONE OUT, BECAUSE DOWN THERE, JUST OVER THE RAIL OFF THE PORT SIDE, LIES THE WRECK OF THE SALEM EXPRESS.

Sunk after striking a reef during a storm on the night of 15 December 1991, on a voyage from Jeddah to Safaga, the roll-on roll-off passenger ferry went down in the space of 10 minutes with the loss of 470 lives. In spite of intensive recovery efforts in the aftermath of the tragedy, the wreck was eventually sealed with bodies still inside.

Perhaps I should say that the mood on the dive deck was sombre, that we hardly said a word as we kitted up, each lost in our private thoughts. Or that the sun shrank behind dark threatening clouds as the wind picked up, and that the crew started to pray. It would be evocative, atmospheric, and melodramatic, and the sort of thing Clive Cussler might write. But it would be disingenuous.

Truth is, I'm up for this. I really want to dive the *Salem Express*. I'd already decided to dive the wreck if I had the

chance, and I'd already squared away the morality and the ethics of doing it. I know why I'm going over the side, and I'm satisfied I'm diving for the right reasons. I'm not going as a passing ghoul, but because I'm drawn to wrecks, period. I'd be diving the *Salem* if she'd been sent to the seabed as an artificial reef, having served for decades without encountering so much as a squall, or been responsible for a single case of *mal de mer*. If only that had been the case.

But it would be foolish as a recreational diver not to address the moral aspect whilst adding the *Salem* to the log book; it's a tomb, and a relatively recent one. And because I'm finning down towards the once personal possessions that now litter the seabed in the shadow of the wreck. A crusty ghetto blaster, a shoe, a suitcase, it's rotten lid gaping wide.

This isn't the first wreck I've explored where lives were lost. It's not even the first

this week; 31 went down with the *Carnatic*. Nine on the *Thistleborm*. Two on the *Rosalie Moller*. Indeed my interest in wrecks stemmed from diving those sunk in the Pacific theatre during WWII, where there were tremendous casualties, and where remains still lie, although I've never seen any personally, and never had the desire to seek them out.

It doesn't take many war wreck dives before one is compelled to confront what it must have been like, the horror for those aboard as their island sinks beneath them. The drone of bombers, angry specks in the sky homing in on their kill, the blast lifting men off their feet, the fire, the unbearable heat, choking smoke, confusion, panic, even the burning smell. How I possibly relate to that carnage?

Wrecks themselves, their metamorphoses as they slip displaced from our world into the next, softened by coral, changing their forms, mysterious and surreal, captivate

me. There's a certain frisson, a fascination, with seeing something that through circumstance has slipped from view. It's surreal seeing a ship or plane in an environment it was never designed for. I spend far too much time trawling YouTube for clips, reading books, listening to experts, researching, planning trips, buying the T-shirts. And sporting the anorak.

So I personally don't have an objection to diving a wreck that holds dead people, be it sunk in 1941, or 1991, whether I knew there were remains there or not, whether they were soldiers, or as with the *Salem Express*, pilgrims. It is the wreck itself I dive for, rather than any sentiment or history attached to it. But you can understand this is very much a decision for the individual, and I always respect a diver who says "No thanks".

Polarised views within the diving community about exploring such wrecks

SHIPSLOST

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raises yet more questions: Was there a difference in attitude when visiting wrecks lost through different circumstances? For example natural causes, or *force majeure*, as with the SS *Yongala*, lost in a cyclone off Bowling Green Cape, Queensland Australia, in 1911 with all 121 on board. Or through a tragic accident, as was the case with the *Liban*, which collided with the steamship *Insulaire* off the coast of Marseilles in 1903 taking nearly 200.

And what of acts of war? Was there a perceived difference between the loss of men on a purpose-built fighting ship with

the Hell Ships ordeal are determined to tell their story and preserve the memory of their comrades for future generations. Yet the wreck of the *Oryoko Maru* in Subic Bay, Philippines, arguably a monument to those victims, was later flattened and demolished, as it impeded a shipping lane.

If these distinctions seem contrived, consider the wreck diver who pulls a face at the prospect of diving a ship sunk to form an artificial reef over one that was sunk during the course of its natural life?. Or the dive operator who promotes the weaponry of his premier wreck dive.

as there's something to see. But most of the names who went down with the ship we'll never know, and frankly won't care, whether they're 'our brave lads', or not. All the artefacts that can be pilfered probably will be, and yet we can still experience a unique window to the past that a shipwreck offers. The metal remembers and shows us, so we can see the evidence of how the catastrophe unfolded with our own eyes.

This doesn't happen with disasters in the real world, where the site is cordoned off, investigated, sanitised, and put back into service. Sites such as the Hillsborough



the means to defend itself and under orders to send others to the bottom, in contrast to the press-ganged merchant and support vessels of Chuuk or Coron that were essentially sitting ducks?

Or the loss of a Hell Ship? For example, the *Oryoku Maru*, bound for Japanese labour camps with Allied PoWs, who died of suffocation and starvation in the holds, until sunk by American aircraft in an attack that killed 300 more? Those that survived

China remnants on the *Toa Maru*; The crow's Nest, *Salem Express*; Divers approach the stern gun of *Thistlegorm*, Red Sea.



stadium, where 96 Liverpool football fans were killed as the result of a crowd surge in 1989, or most recently the terrorist attacks on the London Transport system of 7th July 2005.

Memorials to the victims are put in place, life goes on, and in time it will all but be forgotten. The disaster of the *Salem Express* will fade with time, as has that of it's more established Red Sea neighbours. The trauma survivors will pass away and the wreck will deteriorate. In it's place will be a virtual past, stories reworked and memories embellished until a myth is built. It's inevitable, but at least those who were lost won't be forgotten. After all, who will be visiting your plot under the mud in a hundred years time?

Which brings us to the subject of wreck recovery, and very murky waters indeed. Bringing a wreck to the surface is a tricky business, as Lew Grade and anyone who has sat through the awful film-of-the-book *Raise the Titanic* will appreciate. In real life it has been done, most notably in 1982 with the *Mary Rose*, the pride of Henry VIII,

that went down with massive loss of life in 1545. They even showed it's salvage live on TV, and it was gripping stuff. There was a bit when the massive steel cradle supporting the timbers 'slipped', threatening to send the whole lot back to the depths. You couldn't have made it up.

A section of the VOC ship *Batavia* lost in 1629 was also recovered in the 1970s, along with human remains, and is now impressively exhibited in the Western Australian Maritime Museum at Fremantle. As recently as December 2007, the Chinese raised an 800-year-old cargo wreck loaded with porcelain, dubbed the *Nanhai 1* from the South China Seas. The reclamation of these time capsules after centuries underwater have attracted wonderment and fascination rather than controversy, reinforcing the idea that the passage of time determines our response to a marine grave, as well as there being no one who might have remembered the initial sinking who might raise the issue of disturbing those lost.

So what about a fatal wreck raised in living memory? Like most English schoolboys of the 1960s, I'd grown up with the *Bluebird*. Her pilot, Donald Campbell CBE was the stuff of legend and cigarette cards. He broke world speed records in the 1950s and 1960s, then in 1964 he set both land and water speed records. He is to this day the only person to set both records in the same year.

In 1967 he took his jet propelled hydroplane *Bluebird K7* onto Coniston Water in an attempt to smash his own record, but on the second run, travelling at over 300 mph, the nose lifted, the boat somersaulted, hung for an instant, then disintegrated on impact with the lake. We all saw the footage and heard his last words.

And there it lay. Until *Project Bluebird*, a team of divers led by Bill Smith, discovered and raised the wreckage from the lake in October 2000. The following June they found and recovered Campbell's body, which had lain separate from the wreck. The interesting thing here was that *Project Bluebird* had raised the wreck, initially against the wishes of some of the Campbell family members. I duly contacted Bill Smith, leader of *Project Bluebird*. I wanted to know how he'd managed to resolve the moral issues inevitably attached to the project. Bill Smith's reply? "If I had a pound for every

time an attempt has been made to drag me into this argument..." He wouldn't be drawn further, suffice to say that "It can be done."

His comments reiterate just how many people find the prospect of recovery distasteful. Now, diving has become more affordable and accessible, so has underwater exploration and detection, therefore allowing more divers to hunt with technology, and with a much greater chance of success. Indeed one Coniston local commented on the sheer number of divers who were in the lake searching like mad. "It has become like looking for the Holy Grail, trying to find Donald Campbell's boat." If it hadn't been Bill Smith and his team that discovered and recovered *Bluebird*, it would've been someone else. And it might have been



someone without the commitment and care and sensitivity that *Project Bluebird* have shown. It's easy to imagine the wreck discovered and subsequently stripped and picked to pieces, trophy items ending up on a variety of mantelpieces, important only to the individuals who recovered them. And when they're gone? Chances are with these scraps out of context, either the kids or house clearance discard them as junk.

So the wreck could never be left *in situ*. Even *Thistlegorm* must lose bits every year. The very nature of the souvenir hunters themselves provide the perfect justification for bringing the wreck to the surface, for

it's own protection, while conveniently eroding any moral objections in the process. Very much a choice between having it recovered properly, or risk it being stripped to the bone by persons unknown.

I wouldn't want to end on such a cynical note, that we 'wreckies' are all self-centred 'glory hunters', only diving wrecks for that souvenir Coke bottle, trophy photograph, commemorative T-shirt, or hard-core penetration bragging rights.

So I'll leave the final reflection to Rod Pearce, who's been searching for, and discovering, war wrecks in Papua New Guinea waters for the past 40 years. "The hardest part is the letters. I still get letters from people looking for their relatives, missing in action. They want to know if